

DHARMA ESSAY

Rev. Shokai Kanai

October 2008

Greetings

(October 1, 2008)

It was April 16, 1964 when I first stepped on American soil. Since then, over forty-four years have passed. To commemorate this anniversary, I would like to present my sermons, speeches, and lectures during those years. “*Dharma Essay*,” is a compilation of my sermons and lectures delivered at the temples in Salt Lake City, Utah, Seattle, Washington, and Los Angeles, California in the past.

I learned many things under the guidance of Reverend Ryobo Fujiwara when I was an assistant minister in the Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple from April 1964 to September 1970. During those six years, I learned English services for Sunday school and the Junior Young Buddhist Association (Jr. YBA). I also learned visitations to members in their homes, hospitals and nursing homes. There were the fund-raising carnivals and other various activities. It was a very energetic time for the temple because of the expansion of the property in order to build a new temple.

One of the most important lessons that I learned was publishing the monthly newsletter, “*Betsuin Dayori*.” Rev. Fujiwara wrote the articles for the newsletter in Japanese. The assistant ministers, typed it on stencils with an old style Japanese typewriter, translated it into English and typed it once again with an English typewriter. We had a printing machine that used tubed ink. We mailed about 500 copies every month with the help of several members.

This publication influenced me for years to come. When I became a head minister of the Nichiren Buddhist Temples in Salt Lake City, Utah, in Seattle, Washington, and again in Los Angeles, California, I continued to publish the bi-monthly newsletters as I continue to do today at the Nichiren Buddhist Kannon Temple in Nevada.

Rev. Fujiwara let the assistant ministers be in charge of youth activities such as Sunday school and Jr. Y.B.A. This provided many opportunities for me to talk with children and their parents in English. I kept all of my sermons and published them in a small booklet called “*Daily Practice*” in English and “*Sekkyo-shu #1*” in Japanese. I presented these booklets to the members as a gift of appreciation at the time of my farewell.

Following the dedication of the present building of the Los Angeles temple held in September 1970, I transferred to the Salt Lake Nichiren Buddhist Temple where I stayed until 1979. “*LOTUS*” was the monthly bulletin of the Salt Lake City temple. There were not many Nichiren Shu members in Utah, Idaho, Colorado and Nebraska, but the temple was supported by many non-Nichiren Shu members. There were over 200 mailing addresses which allowed us to get a bulk mail rate. The temple could not support me enough financially, so I worked as a part-time gardener, a check sorter in a bank and a

teacher of Japanese language at the University of Utah. My three children were born there in spite of the difficult living conditions; we enjoyed the quiet and natural life. During nine years in Utah, the monthly newsletters were mailed out 96 times, until July 1979. Typing in English and Japanese was the same as when I was in Los Angeles but the printing machine was not electric. It did not matter because the quantity of printing was much less. Leaving Salt Lake City, I compiled these newsletters and published “*THE LOTUS*” in English and “*Sekkyo-shu #2*” in Japanese, and then mailed them out to most of the people on the mailing list.

The Seattle Nichiren Buddhist Temple was the next place where I was the head priest and stayed there until August 1988. “*LIGHT*” (Referring to the rays of the sun and the moon) was the name of the monthly bulletin. For several years, I still used an English typewriter and the same type of Japanese typewriter. It picked up one character at a time and struck the stencil hard to type the characters. The printing machine was the same kind that was used at the Los Angeles temple; it caused a lot of trouble. I used to chant O’Daimoku to the machine to help it cooperate with my work. Later, the Seattle temple bought a copy machine that made my work much easier.

Then, I started to use a Japanese word-processor that can be used as an English typewriter, too. It made my work of publishing the newsletter easier for correcting and editing while keeping the articles organized in a file.

In 1980s the dial-a-message became popular which was a new type of propagation tool via telephone. I bought a new recorder and asked a telephone company to hook up another phone line making my sermons available 24 hours a day. Anyone around the world was able to call the telephone number at any time and listen to my sermon in English. The international and long distance telephone calls were very expensive at that time; therefore, only local people called. It was more popular among non-Nichiren Buddhists, because members of the temple were able to listen to me every Sunday. The messages were renewed twice a month. Since the recorded message was in English only, I asked an American friend to record my talks. It lasted for 30 months until July, 1988, when I had to return to Japan to take over my father’s temple after his death.

Before leaving America, I published all of the messages from the Dial-A-Sermon in English and Japanese and then presented the booklet to members and friends. A second edition was published in Japan with the same contents; however, all of them are now out of stock.

Returning to the Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple in order to recruit new members, I became a head priest of that temple in September, 1994 and started to publish a temple newsletter every other month till my resignation for my ambition to propagate the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Shonin till October 14, 2007. During my missionary work in Los Angeles I published the “*Dharma Essay*”, compiling my sermons, speeches, articles and lectures into a book. This publication is actually still a work in progress, reflecting my life long dedication to my study and practice of Buddhism. Through these small messages on Buddhism, I sincerely hope many people come to understand Buddhism and Nichiren Shu teachings. The booklet was a token of

my appreciation for the commemoration of my 40th Anniversary as an overseas minister and the 90th Anniversary of the Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple, where I started my missionary work in 1964.

January 1, 2008, I started a new bulletin at the Nichiren Buddhist Kannon Temple of Nevada. It is called "*RAIDIANCE*" hoping the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Shonin will shine around the world like the radiance of the sun and the moon. My speeches and lectures in Las Vegas appear on REV. SHOKAI KANAI'S RESENT MESSAGES on this web site (www.kannon-temple-nevada.org).

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GENERAL BUDDHISM

Introduction to Buddhism

Many years ago, I was invited to give a lecture to a class studying world religions at a high school. After the discussion, a student told me, "Many Christians think that Buddhism is superstitious." She then asked me, "What do you, as a Buddhist, think about Christianity?"

I explained that Buddhism is not superstitious. Buddhism is a religion based on seeking truth and becoming free from all troubles, sufferings, and unhappiness. But, frankly speaking, I had also once thought that Buddhism was superstitious, too. Being a son of a Buddhist priest, I had been told, "You shall be a priest and take over my place when you grow up." At first, I agreed with my father's command. But as a teenager, I began to have doubts about Buddhism. I thought that my father's actions as a Buddhist priest such as offering water, rice, and fruits at the altar were meaningless and superstitious. I felt that Buddhism was too hard to understand and was only meant for the elderly and the dead in Japan.

While I was a freshman in college, I also attended a Bible class taught in English at a Baptist church in Tokyo. It was the cheapest way for me to learn English. Compared to Buddhism, Christianity was easier for me to understand even though it was in English. I kept going to the Bible class for almost two years. I became attracted to the religion and was almost ready to convert and become a Christian.

However, one day I listened to the evangelist's criticism of Buddhism. His criticism was without knowledge of Buddhism. I did not like his criticism at all. Since then, I never returned to the Christian church. I felt that at least my understanding of Buddhism was better than his at that moment.

After that, I really began to study Buddhism intently. As I studied it more, I learned that Buddhism is not filled with superstitious beliefs. Some Christians may think so, but it is like the blind man who touches an elephant's leg and proclaims it as a tree trunk.

Buddhism is not hard if you try to understand it whole heartedly. It is not difficult at all, if you are interested in it. You can say the same about any subject or sport. Even if it is hard, if you have a certain goal like an Olympic gold medal, you will strive toward it. In the same way, if you are interested in Buddhism, you will work very hard to understand it.

What is a goal of Buddhism, then? It is to attain peace of mind, peace on earth, and happiness for everyone. In order to attain peace and happiness, praying is not enough. You must realize the truth, and you must act with the wisdom of that truth.

What is truth in Buddhism? It is found in the seal of the three laws which greatly distinguishes Buddhism from other religions. The Three laws are as follows:

- 1. Everything is impermanent;**
- 2. Everything depends on others; and**
- 3. Nirvana is a state of stillness or quietness.**

For example, a memorial service is a good time for us to learn about these laws. First of all, we can learn about the law that everything is impermanent. We realize that we will die sooner or later. A memorial service is held for those who have passed away. All living beings will die. All physical things will be discarded sooner or later. Everything exists while it is changing. At the moment of one's birth, the process of growing starts. When one reaches full growth, one will progress to old age, and eventually death will come. At the memorial service, we must realize that our ancestors are dead, and we will join them in the future.

A memorial service is also a good time for us to learn about the law that everything depends on others. The memorial service reminds us that we had deceased parents, grandparents, and ancestors. Do you know how many blood related ancestors you have had in ten generations? You have two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, 16 great-great grandparents. $16 \times 2 = 32$, $32 \times 2 = 64$. For each generation, you multiply by 2. It becomes 128, 256, 512, 1,024. In ten generations, you have 1,024 great-great, great---grandparents. When you add all ten generations, you will have had over 2,000 ancestors.

It is true that if one of them were missing, you would not be here today. Everything from your head to your toes came from them, so we must appreciate our ancestors. Finally, a memorial service is a good time for us to learn about the law that Nirvana is a state of stillness. This is like the stillness that has come back after a fire has gone out once all the fuel has been used up. We need this quiet moment at the memorial service.

Nirvana is the calmness found after the stopping of the cycle of birth and death. If there is no birth, there is no growth, disease, nor death. When we have a memorial service, we decorate the altar with beautiful flowers, offer rice, tea, fruits, and some sweet like a cake or *manju*. A memorial service is like a birthday party. We often celebrate one's birthday with cake, goodies and sometimes dinner. Of course, the dead never eat rice, fruits, and the sweet. But they "eat" the smell; therefore, we must offer fresh food, and fresh and

beautiful flowers. We also have a physical body, so we need to eat physical food; on the other hand, spiritual beings do not, so they "eat" the non-physical smell.

One's memorial day is the date of death; however, when we look at it from the spiritual realm, it is also his or her birthday to be born in the spiritual realm. You would not be very happy if your parents or your spouse forgets your birthday. It is the same with a dead ancestor. Thus, we Buddhists hold memorial services again and again.

Summarizing what I said, Buddhism is to understand and practice the Buddha's teachings. Buddha taught us the universal truth such as **“Everything Relies on Others,”** **“Everything Is Constantly Changing,”** and **“Stillness Comes When We Realize the Laws and Act According to the Universal Laws.”**

A memorial service is a good time to realize Buddha's teachings and practice them. Let us appreciate our ancestors because without them we would not be here.

April 8th Is Buddha Sakyamuni's Birthday

(LOTUS 39, March/April, 2000)

April 8th falls on a Sunday this year. It is rare that the Buddha's Birthday comes on a Sunday. On this day, the Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple will hold the *Hanamatsuri* Service at 10 AM to commemorate his Birth. The Los Angeles Buddhist Church Federation will hold its events starting at 1 PM at the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center Gallery in Little Tokyo. Please join us for the both of these services and lectures.

According to legend, Sakyamuni selflessly devoted and sacrificed himself for others, both humans and animals during his many previous lives. As a result, he was born in *Tusita* Heaven (one of six heavens in Buddhism). There He waited to be reborn as a human being.

Then, there was Queen Maya who lived in the Kapilavastu Kingdom at the southern foothills of the Himalayas, in the present-day country of Nepal. One night the queen had a strange dream in which she saw a white elephant entering her body, then she became pregnant.

When the time for delivery approached, the Queen tried to return to her parents' home for the birth. On her way she took a rest in a beautiful garden known as Lumbini Park.

When she tried to pick up a blossom from a branch, a prince was born. Heaven and earth rejoiced. However, there was no clean warm water prepared to wash the new born baby. Suddenly nectar fell from heaven which allowed the baby to have his first bath. Today, during the Buddha's Birthday Service, we pour a scoop of sweet tea over the statue of the infant Buddha to commemorate the Buddha's First Bath.

The legend said that soon after the prince was born, the infant stood firmly and said, "From heaven to earth, I am the most honored one." Then he took seven steps in each of the four directions: north, east, west and south.

When I first heard these stories of the Buddha in my childhood, I considered Buddhism superstitious. However, when I was in college and took classes on Buddhism. The more I studied, the more I realized that Buddha is alive, and his teachings are for every one of us today. I also realized that each legend concerning the Buddha's history contained a deeper meaning and important message. Specially, the seven steps symbolizing that the Buddha would not have a cycle of birth and death in the six realms of existence (Hell, Hungry Ghost, Animal, Fighting Spirit, Human Being, and Heavenly Being). The first six steps represent the six realms of existence, and by taking the seventh step, the Buddha breaks the cycle of birth and death - that is known as Nirvana. The infant Buddha standing firmly and speaking words indicated that the infant was quite different from other people. He is the one, the "World Honored One."

Buddhism is not superstition. It is a religion that seeks happiness and freedom from suffering.

Let me encourage you to study Buddhism, so that any misunderstandings will then be solved.

How Can A Newborn Baby Walk?

(1999 KOKORO NO KATE, Los Angeles Buddhist Churches Federation)

There are many stories of superhuman events revealed in Buddhist scriptures or *sutras*. They may lead the readers to skepticism, but once they have realized the deeper meanings of the superhuman stories, they will appreciate the founder of Buddhism.

There are a number of miracles associated with Siddhartha Gautama from the moment of his birth. One of those was that the baby Buddha walked seven steps soon after his birth in Lumbini Garden. When I heard of the Buddha's walking the seven steps, I was very young and thought how great he must have been to have done this. I respected him just as young children today love their Superman or Superwoman.

However, when I was in a grade school, I started to doubt how a newborn baby could stand up firmly on his feet. How could he walk seven steps and how could he speak those words, "Above the earth and below the heaven, I am the most honored one!" My doubts about Buddhism grew more when I learned about such supernatural phenomena in Buddhism. I thought that Buddhism was full of superstitions and just for the elderly to believe in, but not for me. The doubt continued until my college years.

In college, I had the opportunity to learn Buddhism. The more I read and studied Buddhism; my doubts began to clear one after another. I learned that all of the so-called miracles had symbolic meanings behind the words.

Siddhartha Gautama renounced his luxurious palace life and became a mendicant monk who sought liberation from old age, disease, and death. After six years of ascetic practice, he reached the answer. It was to be freed from the cycle of birth and death. If one was not born, he or she will never get old, will never be sick, and will never die.

Life is a cycle of birth and death. Depending on one's *karma*, he or she will be reborn in one of the six realms; hell, hungry spirits, animals, fighting devils, human beings and heavenly beings.

Siddhartha stopped the cycle of birth and death by eliminating his *karma*. He went one step beyond the six cycles of birth and death. Therefore, the seventh step symbolizes Nirvana, the state of enlightenment achieved by Siddhartha Gautama when he became the Buddha of the Sakya Clan.

When we are young, we do not worry about the cycle of birth and death. However, our minds are constantly shifting from a higher state to a lower state and vice versa. The six realms in which living beings rebirth from one to another symbolizes the states of our minds, such as anger, thirst or greed, irrationality, belligerence, indecisiveness and joyfulness. For instance, when you score a goal in a game, your mood is one of joy, a moment later, someone might step on your foot, and that joy might turn to anger or pain.

But if your state of mind can transcend that of the six realms, you can remain calm and relaxed. In this way, our minds may be closer to the Buddha's.

Let us try to expand our minds one step further and to listen to Buddha's encouragement to reach for that seventh step. The seven steps of the infant Buddha encourage us to liberate ourselves from the six worlds of birth and death and maintain a higher state of mindfulness.

The Seal of Three Laws

(Sept. 15, 1987)

The Seal of Three Laws distinguished Buddhism from other religions:

First, **All Elements Are Non-Substantial**; second, **All Things Are Impermanent**; and third, **Nirvana Is Quiescence**. There are many denominations in Buddhism. They have different scriptures, teachings, practices, and images of the Buddha. However, the Seal of the Three Laws is a consistent teaching among all Buddhist sects.

Buddhism teaches that all elements are non-substantial: all existence and phenomena appear and disappear depending on conditions of others; therefore, nothing can exist all by itself.

For instance, a table has not existed as a table a long time ago. It was originally a tree that was turned into lumber. The tree had grown with the help of soil, water, sunshine, and so on. The same thing can be said of ourselves. We have not existed as we are today for a very long time. We exist because our parents existed.

Buddhism teaches that all things are impermanent. For all phenomena and existence are the results and conditions of others. If others change, this must change, too. Nothing can exist permanently as it is.

For example, flowers bloom in spring and wither in fall. Human beings and other living beings die when sickness or old age approaches them.

Buddhism teaches that Nirvana is quiescence. This means, for example, the state in which a fire has gone out after all the fuel has burnt, and quietness has returned.

In other words, the noisy music is switched off, and a very quiet state returns. When we blow out our wrong thoughts and evil-mind, we shall realize that we are alive because of other people and nature. You may wonder that if you extinguish yourself, nothing will remain afterwards. However, to die is to be reborn, just as flowers and plants seem to be dead in the fall, but after a long cold winter, they sprout again and bloom again into beautiful flowers in the spring.

The Seal of Three Laws teaches us that nothing exists forever, because everything relies on others, and that we only see things which exist in a part of the process of a constant changing; and that when we don't adhere to temporal existence, we can see truth.

Three Bodies of Buddha Sakyamuni

(Buddhist Federation Hanamatsuri message)
(April 7, 1996)

Happy birthday Buddha Sakyamuni! April 8th is Sakyamuni Buddha's Birthday.

Sakyamuni is not the only one Buddha; there are many Buddhas, like Amida Buddha, and Dainichi.

Among the Los Angeles Buddhist Church Federation members, Amida Buddha is worshipped in Jodo-shu Betsuin, Nishi-Hongwanji Betsuin, and Higashi Honganji Betsuin. Do you know Amida Buddha's Birthday? I am a Buddhist priest, but I don't know his birthday. In Koyasan temple, members worship Dainichi Buddha or Maha Vairocana Buddha. Do they know the birthday of the Maha Vairocana Buddha? I think they do not know it. I bet you don't know, either.

I will tell you why we do not know the birthdays of Amida Buddha and Maha Vairocana Buddha. However I will hold onto the answer until the end of my speech.

Today, I would like to talk about the three bodies of the Buddha. The term "body" is not to be understood dualistically as the body opposed to the spirit. Rather "body" is a manifestation, that is, the three properties of the Buddha. They are *Ojin*, *Ho-jin*, and *Hosshin* or they are called *Nirmana-kaya*, *Samboga-Kaya*, and *Dharma-kaya* in Sanskrit.

The first is the manifested body called *Ojin* or *Nirmana-Kaya*. The Buddha revealed himself in this world as the historical Sakyamuni Buddha. Just like us, he was born, grew, and attained Enlightenment, taught us various teachings, and passed away.

The second is the *Ho-jin* or *Sambhoga-kaya*. This is the Reward-body. The reason it is called the reward-body is because he became a Buddha as the result of a Bodhisattva's unselfish practices of compassion and the vows to save all sentient beings. A good example is the Amida Buddha. Sometimes, I myself get confused wondering if Amida Buddha is a real Buddha or if he still is a Bodhisattva. Because he said in his 48 vows, he will not become a Buddha until all sentient beings attain Buddhahood.

The third is the *Hosshin* or *Dharma-kaya*. This is the absolute nature of the Buddha. It is said that the Dainichi Buddha or Maha Vairocana Buddha is the *Hosshin*. The Dharma body of the Buddha symbolizes absolute truth, which is Maha Vairocana Buddha.

Sakyamuni, Amida, and Dainichi are all Buddhas. But they are emphasized in different properties of the Buddha. Sakyamuni represents manifest body, Amida symbolizes Reward body, and Dainichi is Dharma body.

The three bodies of the Buddha are interpreted in many other ways.

Today we are celebrating the birth of Gautama Siddhartha who became Sakyamuni Buddha at the age of 35.

So let me talk about the three bodies of Sakyamuni Buddha. You may know now that it was only Buddha Sakyamuni who was a historical Buddha.

He was born, grew, and attained Enlightenment, taught the insights of Buddha, grew old and died at the age of 80. He is *Ojin* - one who has had a physical body just like us.

However, when the infant Buddha was born on April 8th, he was not a Buddha yet. It is commonly known that he denounced his life of a prince in Kapilavatsu Palace and led homeless life of a monk. After six years of ascetic practices and meditation, he attained Enlightenment. He became a Buddha. As the reward of his practice, he became a Buddha. So it is called the Reward-body of the Buddha after his enlightenment. Moreover, many people believed that it was not only the six years of practice of asceticism that led Gautama to become a Buddha. Rather during his many previous lives, he was a Bodhisattva and practiced his vows to become a Buddha and had many unselfish devotions to others to become a Buddha. There are many stories regarding his previous lives like offering his flesh to tigers and pigeons. As the result of these vows and practices, he became Sakyamuni Buddha. This is another aspect of the three bodies of the Buddha Sakyamuni.

Moreover, what Sakyamuni Buddha became enlightened about was the Dharma or absolute truth. Dharma existed before Gautama Siddhartha attained Enlightenment. It is the same concept that gravity existed before Isaac Newton discovered gravity by watching an apple falling to the ground. But without the Sakyamuni Buddha, we may not know the Dharma and also we may not know about Amida Buddha and Vairocana Buddha. The Buddha Sakyamuni revealed the Dharma. So, the Sakyamuni Buddha is also the embodiment of the absolute truth, Dharma. This is called *Hosshin*, or Dharma body of the Sakyamuni Buddha. Therefore, the Buddha Sakyamuni has all three bodies in one.

Let me go back to the question of the birthdays of Amida Buddha and Vairocana Buddha. They are not historical Buddhas. They were not born in this world. Therefore, they have no birthday. No birthday means no death. The historical Buddha was born on April 8th and passed away on February 15th. If there is a beginning, there must be an end. If there is no beginning, there is no end. Dharma is never born nor dies. Dharma is eternal. Although the Manifest-body of the Buddha is mortal, the Dharma-body of the Buddha is eternal. Dharma has existed before God created man and woman. Dharma will exist even after the final judgment of the God. Thus, the Buddha is eternal.

Another interpretation of the Three Bodies of the Buddha is that the historical Buddha Sakyamuni is the *Ojin* or the manifest body. That is to say that the characters of the sutras which we read are the *Hosshin*, because sutras contain Dharma. The scriptures which we read at the temples and at our homes are the same as the Dharma body of the Buddha. So you should not throw the scriptures away or not put them on the floor directly. We must

handle the service books respectfully. And also the Reward body of the Buddha is ourselves, because someday in the Future we will become Buddhas as the result of our practice.

The last interpretation of the Three Bodies of the Buddha is the most important for us. It is to realize that we have the three bodies of Buddha. For instance, our physical body is the Dharma-body. Our mind is the Reward-body, and our behavior is the Manifest-body. The Buddha nature lies within us just as the flower is in the seed. In the same way as the flower needs the warm rays of the sun to bring forth the blossom, so as our Buddha-nature requires an outside force to draw it into awakening. The force is to chant the Nembutsu for Amida Buddha's followers, the zazen for the Zen members, chanting the *go-hogo* for the Koyasan temple members and the Odaimoku the Sacred Title for Nichiren's followers which contain all others.

However the Three Bodies of the Buddha are interpreted, Sakyamuni Buddha revealed us how to attain Buddhahood. Let us pay homage to Sakyamuni Buddha. Let us put our hands in Gassho and repeat our Buddhist vows –

· **"I put my faith in Buddha."**

· **"I put my faith in Dharma."**

· **"I put my faith in Sangha."**

Ambition in the New Year

(LOTUS #44, January/February, 2002)

There is a saying, "One who talks about the past is an old person, and one who talks about the future is a young person." It is not a matter of age but willingness.

Regardless of one's age, everyone should have ambitions. Not only a person but an organization and a company should have ambitions. The Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple has clear ambitions for 2002, 2003 and 2004. We are going to build a multipurpose hall during this coming year. Commemorating the 750th Anniversary of the Propagation of the O'Daimoku, "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo," in 2003, we will erect an O'Daimoku Monument in front of the temple, praying for world peace and the security of the nation. In 2004, we will celebrate the 90th Anniversary of our temple and hold the Convention for the Nichiren Order of North America at our temple.

In December, Koichi Tom and Toyo Nerio Charitable Remainder Unitrust (Nerio CRUT) made a very generous donation to erect a building in the proximity of the temple, in the name of Koichi Tom and Toyo Nerio. We are still in the process of organizing a building committee, but I wish to build a multipurpose building including a *Nokotsu-Do* (a room to store ashes and urns in perpetuity). I would like to discuss other ambitions some other time. Of course, I have my own personal ambitions for this year, for three years from now, and for ten years from now.

Please have ambitions for this year and the future. Even if a doctor tells you that you will not live too long, have strong faith in O'Daimoku and trust Nichiren Dai'Shonin who promised to greet you at the northeast corner of the spiritual realm after one's death.

***Bon-No* (New Year's Eve)**

(Dec. 24, 1995)

There are only seven days left before the New Year. At midnight of the New Year's Eve, temple bells are struck 108 times. At this temple, we will have the New Year's Eve Service at seven o'clock in the evening on next Sunday. After the service, all attendants will strike the bell 108 times in total. The number of 108 symbolizes 108 *bon-no* or mental functions which disturb our minds.

Wishing their disturbing mental functions to be gone with the sound of the gongs, Buddhists hit the temple bells during the time of passing the old year and welcoming a new year.

Frankly speaking it is not that easy to erase our disturbing mental functions or *bon-no*. Because we often worry, we are often confused, deceived, tempted, or suffer with sickness or other troubles.

Those who like to smoke may fight against the temptation of tobacco, those who like to eat sweets will be worried about their diet, and those who like to drink alcohol will be in trouble if they drive a car. These disturbing mental functions will often create bad karma which will sometimes result in unhappiness like an accident, sickness, fighting, or other mishaps. In order to avoid such mishaps, Hinayana Buddhist priests practice asceticism such as not to stock food, not to be married, not to eat meat, not to drink alcohol, not to have any property, and so on.

On the other hand, Buddhist priests like me and other Japanese priests are married, have children, own properties, eat meat, and drink *sake*. Therefore they worry about their families, they are confused with income tax reports, or they suffer with overweight just as some of you also do.

Many people are disturbed in their minds with alcohol, money, sexual desire, gambling, or higher positions. We, Mahayana Buddhists, do not practice asceticism, but we must know how to control our passion for money, sex, fame, and other desires.

A friend of mine seduced a woman and cheated on his wife who had trusted him 100 percent. As the result, their married life was broken apart. Their children do not listen to their father any more. Even only one mistake makes many people's trouble, unhappiness, and fighting increase immensely.

Let us know how, now, to control our passions, desires, anger, arrogance, and false views. Don't wait till the end of the year to change. We must control ourselves every moment. The Odaimoku will give you strength to fight against these *bon-no*. Let us chant the Odaimoku vigorously and overcome these troubles.

Three Lives of Maitreya Bodhisattva

(Feb. 1, 1988)

In Chapter One of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha's disciples and followers, as well as deities and animals gather in front of the meditating Buddha Sakyamuni at Mt. Sacred Eagle in Rajagriha, India.

The Buddha does not speak at all in this chapter but meditates in deep concentration. Then suddenly he emits a ray of light from the white curls between his eyebrows, and illuminates down to the hells and up to heavens of eighteen thousand worlds in the east.

Maitreya Bodhisattva wonders, "Why is he displaying this good omen?" He asks Manjusri Bodhisattva who was a great scholar.

"I think that the Buddha wishes to expound a great teaching named the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma. The reason is that, in my previous existence, I saw the same good omen at the time of a Buddha called Sun-Moon-Light. He emitted a ray of light then expounded the great dharma."

After the Nirvana of the Buddha Sun-Moon-Light, Wonderful-Light Bodhisattva kept the Lotus Sutra and expounded it to people for many years. One of his disciples was called Fame-Seeking. He was attached to gain. He read and recited many sutras but did not understand them. He forgot many parts of those sutras. Therefore he was called Fame-Seeking. But he later planted the roots of good and made offerings to innumerable Buddhas. Because of these good conducts, he will become a Buddha in his future life. He will be called Buddha Maitreya.

Manjusri continued to talk. "Wonderful-Light at that time was no one but myself, and Fame-Seeking was no one but you."

Don't you think that Fame-Seeking is like you and me? Even though we hardly understand the teaching of the Lotus Sutra and easily forget phrases of the sutra, we will be able to become Buddhas in our future by accumulating good conducts. This is what Chapter One teaches us.

Moreover, Chapter Twenty-eight of the Lotus Sutra reveals, "Anyone who copies this sutra will be reborn in the Heaven of the Trayastrimsa Gods immediately after his present life."

The future Buddha is you and I!

Buddha's Statue Is Smiling

(February 1, 1988)

In 1988, I had a chance to visit the Salt Lake Nichiren Buddhist Temple where I was a residential minister for over nine years before I moved to Seattle. When I went into the temple and saw the statue of Saint Nichiren, I was surprised that the statue is smiling.

While I was a minister of the temple, I have never seen such a smiling statue of Nichiren Shonin. I always thought the statue looked in despair. Of course, any statue cannot change its face once it has been carved. However surprisingly enough a statue looks different depending on the emotion of the person who look at it.

While I was in Salt Lake City, I might have had a despairing mind because of the smallness of the church and its small membership. I had to have a second job to raise my three children. For two years I was a part time gardener, for two years I was a Japanese language teacher at the University of Utah, and the last two years, I worked in the graveyard shift as a computer operator at a bank. Ministers from Japan visited Nichiren churches on the west coast, but they hardly ever visited my temple in Salt Lake City. So I had financially a hard time, therefore I might have become desperate.

Christians are prohibited from idol worship. Buddhism had also been prohibited having any statue or image of the Buddha for about 500 years. However, during the 2nd and 3rd century, stone image carving was introduced from Greece to Gandhara, Northern India. Therefore the statues in Gandhara have curly hair and beards like other Greek sculptures.

Later, the method of sculpture was introduced to different countries. They made their own images of the Buddha. When you compare these images of the Buddha, you can tell in which country the image was created such as in India, China, or Japan. It is often said that a Buddhist statue becomes similar to its sculptor. Not only that, the statue changes its face depending on who looks at it. In this way, the Buddha statues are like mirrors.

Revenge and Forgiveness

(April 16, 1988)

Once there was a king name Calamity, whose country was conquered by a neighboring king named Brahamadatta. King Calamity was captured, but fortunately his son escaped.

The prince tried to find some way to save his father, but his efforts were in vain. On the day of his father's execution, the prince made his way to the execution grounds where he could do nothing but watch. King Calamity, noticed his son in the crowd and said, as if he were talking to himself, "Do not search for a long time; Do not act hastily, resentment can be calmed only by forgetting or forgiving."

Long after his father's death, the prince looked for ways to avenge his father. Later he was employed as an attendant at Brahamadatta's palace where he won King Brahamadatta's favor. Of course, the king did not know the prince's family line.

One day, when the king went hunting, the prince went with him, and he sought an opportunity for revenge. The prince was able to lead his master to a lonely place by saying it was a good hunting spot. The king was very tired and fell asleep with his head on the lap of the prince. He fully trusted his servant.

King Calamity's son drew his dagger and placed it on the king's throat. He had waited for this moment for many years. He had patiently served his hated master just to seek vengeance. However, at that moment the words of his father flashed into his mind. He tried to brush the image aside and tried to kill the king, but he could not. Suddenly, the king awakened and told his servant that he had dreamed that the son of King Calamity was trying to kill him.

The prince, holding the dagger in one hand, grabbed the king. He identified himself as the son of King Calamity and declared that the time had finally come for him to avenge his father's death. But he could not kill the king. The prince threw his dagger down, fell on his knees before the king and told him of his father's final words.

When the king heard the prince's story, he was very impressed and forgave him. Later, the King restored some of the prince's property to him, and their two countries came to live in friendship for a long time.

The words spoken by King Calamity just before his execution were "Do not search for a long time," which meant that resentment should not be nourished. "Do not act hastily" which meant that friendship should not be broken hastily. Resentment cannot be satisfied by resentment. Hatred cannot be overcome by hatred. It can only be removed by forgiving.

The Four Desires

(Sep. 1, 1987)

All human beings have desires. Buddhism is sometimes misunderstood because it teaches the quenching of desires. If these desires are removed from us, we will be in a vegetative existence. It is good to have desires, if we are able to control them.

We all have four basic desires from which other desires form. These desires are the ultimate goals of all humankind. They are 1) the Desire not to die, 2) the Desire not to suffer, 3) the Desire to be free, and 4) the Desire to live in utopia.

These four desires are in common for everyone in the world. To attain them, Nichiren Buddhists chant "Namu Myo-ho Ren-ge Kyo."

In daily life, without realizing these goals, everyone is trying to reach them. For example: Death is inevitable to all. However, in a long history of human life, we strive to live longer by development and improvement of sanitation and medical treatment. They provide longer and healthier lives for us. Religion also teaches the eternal life of the Buddha or Eternal God.

We all have a desire not to suffer; however, the rich and the poor experience hardship in their daily lives. Everyone has suffering of some type. To minimize sufferings and hardships, there are many developments in agriculture, forestry, fishery, transportation, communication, and so on.

The desire to be free is very strong, and it would be great if we could do anything we want at any time with no one else telling us what to do. However, living in society, we cannot be absolutely free. However, we still seek after freedom in religion, philosophy, ethics, morals, literature, speech, publication, and so forth.

The desire to live in a Utopia finds development of constitutions, the economy, politics, education, law enforcement, international affairs, and so on.

The purpose of living in this world is to fulfill these four desires.

It is important to realize that we are striving for fulfilling these desires in our daily work and daily lives. The five characters of Myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo teach this, because it is positive thinking and is the power of harmony to universal laws.

Inequality of Human Beings

(May 1, 1988)

A long time ago, a young man in India was surprised to see inequality of human beings. Some people are rich and have many treasures while others are so poor and have nothing to eat. Some are healthy, while others are always sick. Some are strong, and others are weak. Why are they not equal if a God created everyone equal?

He sought answers from a priest of the Brahmins. The priest said, "Almighty God created men in his will. The rich or the poor are the God's will. We cannot do anything about it." The young man was not satisfied with the answer. Then he went to the Buddha Sakyamuni to ask him the same question.

The Buddha said, "Inequality of human beings is not the work of a God, rather it is the result of one's karma in the past. One who has had good karma in the past has a good life, but one who has had bad karma has an unhappy life in this world.

In Buddhism, karma is a general term for one's actions, thoughts, and words. All karmas are recorded in one's mind like a black box in an airplane. We, human beings, also have a similar recording device in our minds. It records all actions, thoughts, as well as what we did or said or thought, the subconscious mind keeps this in the memory. Therefore, sometimes hypnosis is used to recall one's forgotten memory.

After one's death, a body of a human being will dissolve into soil, water, heat, and gas. The body itself disappears; however, a soul that records all karma will start a new life again. We are often surprised to see a child's excellent talent in art or music. It is because the child has learned the skill in his or her previous lives and been able to recall the memory.

Therefore, even if one is dying this evening, a lesson that he or she has learned today is recorded in his or her mind. Since it records everything good or bad, let us try to do something good.

Many Buddhas

(March 1, 1988)

Siddhartha Gautama left his parents, lovely wife, and a child in Kapilavastu Palace at the age of 29. He denounced the luxurious life of the kingdom and became a monk with a homeless life. After six years of practice, He attained Enlightenment under a Bodhi tree, and then he became the Sakyamuni Buddha. He is the only historical Buddha who revealed the ultimate truth.

The truth has universality and adequacy. If the Buddha's teachings that were revealed 2,000 years ago did not apply to our daily lives, the teachings would not be true. If the Buddha's teachings that can be applied in only one place are not adequate in other places, the teachings would not be true, either. Because the Buddha Dharma is universal and adequate, Buddhists have respected the teachings and worshipped the Buddha.

Since the truth is universal and adequate, the truth that the Sakyamuni Buddha has revealed must have existed even before His Enlightenment just as gravity must have existed before Newton discovered it. If the truth existed for millions, billions, trillions, or an infinite number of years ago, then the truth must have been taught by many different Buddhas in the past. A scripture says there were seven past Buddhas. Amida Buddha of the Nembutsu Sect is one of them. Dainichi Buddha of the Shingon Sect is also one of the seven past Buddhas. Amida Buddha lives in the far west, and Dainichi Buddha lives throughout the universe. Sakyamuni Buddha only lives in the same world where we live.

In Buddhism, we imagine the eternal past and also the eternal Future because there is no beginning and no end in time. Since the Buddha Dharma is universal and adequate, the same truth shall be taught in the Future by a Buddha. That Buddha is in the Tushita Heaven now. He is only Buddha in the Future so far. But there should be more Buddhas because time is limitless.

The Future Buddha is practicing Buddha's teachings in the heaven now.

He is not a Buddha yet, therefore he is called Bodhisattva Maitreya. In a broad sense, all of us are Bodhisattvas, because we seek Enlightenment and try to help others. We are all candidates to be Buddhas.

Middle Way

(March 16, 1987)

Twice a year, the equinox comes around. At this time, the length of day and night is equal. To harmonize with nature, we must not exceed one way or the other.

Relating the not-exceeding one way or the other, Buddha Sakyamuni gave good advice to His disciple, Sona. He practiced self-denial and self-torturing very hard, alone in a deep forest; he still could not reach Enlightenment. The more he tried to train hard, the more he felt in vain of the practice.

He came to the Sakyamuni Buddha and said, "I am practicing so intensively. But it seems to be in vain. I cannot attain Enlightenment. I want to go back to my layman's life. My family has a lot of money and an estate. I may live happily with the treasures. Should I go back to my home or stay here?"

The Buddha replied to Sona, "I heard you were a very good harp player before you ordained in this Sangha. Is it so?"

"Yes, I was. I know how to play the instrument," answered Sona.

"Then, you must know that when you play a stringed instrument, you should not pull the string too tightly."

"That is exactly right, Buddha.

"Sona, how can you produce good sound from the harp?" asked the Buddha.

"The strings must never be pulled too much or too little," answered Sona.

The Buddha responded with a smile, "Good, my disciple. Your practice in Buddhist life is just like the string of the harp. There is a point of neither too much nor too little."

Keeping the Buddha's advice deep in his mind, Sona practiced the Middle Way, and finally attained Enlightenment.

Our daily life should also be looked the same as with the string of the harp.

Middle Way & Higan Memorial Service

Gautama Siddhartha renounced his prince-hood and left his palace seeking after the truth. He practiced asceticism for six years but could not reach his salvation. He gave up the practices but did not return to his palace life of pleasure and luxury either. He meditated under a Bodhi tree and finally attained Enlightenment to become the Buddha.

In Buddhism not to exceed one way or the other is Middle Way, which is one of the most important teachings of the Buddha Sakyamuni. After hot summer days, there is autumn before the cold winter. After the cold winter, there is spring, full of flowers and joy. The Middle Way is symbolized with the spring and autumn equinox. The Equinox is a time when the sun crosses the equator, making the night and day equal in length of all parts of the earth. The vernal equinox occurs about March 21 while the autumn equinox about September 22nd or 23rd.

In Japan these two equinox days are national holidays. They became legal holidays in the era of Emperor Shomu who ruled Japan between 701 and 756. He was a very devout Buddhist and ruled his country with the Buddha's teachings. In all of Japan's prefectures, the emperor built national temples praying for the security of the nation. The grandest temple among them was the famous Todai-ji Temple, where the Great Image of Buddha is enshrined. The statue weighs 500 tons, its sitting height is 71 feet 6 inches, and the length of face is 16 feet.

Besides building temples and praying for national security, the emperor was very sympathetic to peasants, who were the majority of the Japanese people at that time. He gave an order for farmers not to work for seven days in the spring and autumn. That is each equinox day as well as three days before and three days after. The holidays were to set, but not for having fun. He enforced a system for people to go to cemeteries for the purpose of respecting and appreciating their ancestors, and also to go to temples for listening to Buddha's teachings.

By showing an appreciation to our ancestors and practicing the Buddha's teachings, the Emperor wished all people of Japan to get closer to the other shore of Enlightenment. To leave this shore for the yonder shore means to leave this world of illusion for the world of enlightenment. Therefore, even today, Higan is a day for us to reflect on our daily lives, vow to follow the Buddha's path, and observe memorial services for our ancestors. The Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple will hold the Autumn Higan Service at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, September 21st, 1997. Please write your ancestor's names on the prayer form, which will be ready at the front desk before the service. During the service, Rev. Kanai will offer prayers for your departed ancestors.



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